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### **Three Southeast towns hope ferry route will attract tourists**

- Group promotes its communities under brand name 'Alaska's Rainforest Islands'

The Associated Press

A ferry slated to begin sailing Southeast Alaska next spring will create a new transportation corridor in an area usually transited only by floatplanes and fishing boats. But the three small communities connected by the route hope for more than the marine equivalent of a freeway.

Petersburg, Wrangell and Coffman Cove plan to use the ferry Stikine as the center of a new tourism marketing campaign. The Central Southeast Regional Partnership is promoting its communities under the brand name "Alaska's Rainforest Islands."

Petersburg Economic Development Director Eric Phillips said the towns hope to attract visitors by advertising the area's scenery, wildlife, history, and Native culture.

"Between the three communities, we basically have a majority of the top things people come to Alaska to experience," Phillips said.

Petersburg, a 3,000-resident fishing town, and Wrangell, a 2,200-population community historically linked to timber, are already connected by Alaska Airlines flights and regular service from Alaska Marine Highway System ferries. But their only scheduled connection with Coffman Cove, population 230, is a plane or ferry trip south to Ketchikan, followed by a ferry ride west to Hollis and a winding drive through old Prince of Wales Island logging roads.

That will change in mid-May, when the 200-foot Stikine will begin sailing a route connecting the three communities. It will use new terminals at Coffman Cove and at the south end of Mitkof Island, near Petersburg, and the existing Alaska Marine Highway System dock in Wrangell.

The Stikine will be operated by the Inter-Island Ferry Authority, a port authority created by Wrangell, Petersburg, and four Prince of Wales towns. The \$17.5 million, federally funded ship is being built by Dakota Creek Industries of Anacortes, Wash. The IFA is part of the partnership group sponsoring the tourism campaign.

Wrangell used to be visited by large cruise ships, although none are scheduled for next summer. But Coffman Cove is too small to attract cruise tourists, and Petersburg doesn't want the large ships.

"We feel that what we have to offer within these three communities are an alternative to the Alaska experience that some people are getting in other ports that are frankly becoming more saturated," said Marie Oboczky of the Wrangell Convention and Visitors Bureau. "We have a lot of strengths. The only thing we lack is name recognition."

The communities began working on the campaign with help from the state's Developing Alaska Rural Tourism or DART program, part of the Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development. Tourism Transportation Planner Odin Brudie said the agency is providing about \$20,000 in professional assistance to the communities.

"We've hired contractors for facilitating the discussions about regional identity or a brand. We also have in-house expertise on publications and Web development," he said.

The DART program is also working with the groups in the Bethel, Nome and Copper River areas.

Petersburg, Wrangell and Coffman Cove are still working on a marketing program and have not set a budget for their campaign.

Elaine Price of Coffman Cove said the effort will mostly target summer tourists from outside Alaska. But she said it also could help convince residents of Petersburg and Wrangell to ride the new ferry to Prince of Wales.

"We do have some good hunting and fishing," she said. "And there's a lot of people in Coffman Cove and throughout Prince of Wales Island who have family ties in Petersburg and Wrangell."

The ship - and route - will also connect northern Prince of Wales Island residents with air service north and south, and additional health care and shopping options.

Prince of Wales Island has about a dozen communities, ranging from 1,500-resident Craig to 35-person Edna Bay.

Despite the region's timber industry decline, the island remains a logging center. Many residents also fish commercially. And tourism is considered a growth industry, although attractions and amenities are few compared with Southeast Alaska's larger communities. Unlike much of the rest of the region, most of the 2,600-square-mile island's communities are connected by road.

The new ferry Stikine will be the second ship in the IFA's fleet. Its first, the Prince of Wales, sails between Hollis, on the island's eastern side, and Ketchikan.

Both ships will feed into - and out of - a changing Alaska Marine Highway System. State ferry officials are testing the fast ferries Chenega and Fairweather on routes connecting Ketchikan, Wrangell, Petersburg and Juneau this winter. And long-term plans include additional roads and shuttle ferries that will shorten marine routes throughout Southeast Alaska.